

CLARIFYING MORE
BAFFLING
BIBLICAL PASSAGES

CHAPTER TWENTY

“A NOTE ON
THE WIDOW’S DONATION”

Thomas F. McDaniel, Ph.D.

©

2008

All Rights Reserved

A NOTE ON THE WIDOW'S DONATION

Mark 12:42 and Luke 21:2

Dr. Parker Thompson called my attention to the following statement of John Gill (1810: 474, 699) with reference to the widow's mites in Mark 12:42 and Luke 21:2, "The Persic version here, different from all others, instead of *two mites*, renders it, two bottoms of *thread*, or *yarn*." But John Gill offered no suggestions which would account for the difference in the Persian translation. The Persian translation in the London Polyglott of 1657, indeed, has دو کروهه ریسمان (*dû karûhah rîsmân*) "two balls of thread"¹ for the Greek λεπτὰ δύο, the Latin *duo minuta*, and the Arabic has فلسین (*falsain*)²—all meaning "two small coins." The Syriac reads ܩܘܨܝܢܐ ܕܝܬܐܗܘܢܐ ܕܝܬܐܗܘܢܐ (ܬܝܪܝܢ ܡܝܢܝܢ ܕܝܬܐܗܘܢܐ *těrēn mēnîn dī'tāhûn šēmûnē*)³ "two small coins, which were one-eighth (coins)."³

In light of these variants, it appears that a Syriac translation was used by the Persian translator, who (1) interpreted the ܩܘܨܝܢܐ (*menîn*) as "hair, string" rather than ܩܘܨܝܢܐ (*mēnîn*) "a coin, a *mina*, a measure of weight" and (2) misread the ܩܘܨܝܢܐ (*šēmûnē*) "a farthing, a small coin" as ܩܘܨܝܢܐ (*šēmûṭē*) "a ball of thread, thread wound on a spindle" (Payne Smith 1903: 281, 583).

The Persian variant is due, then, to the simple misreading of the ܐ (*n*) of ܩܘܨܝܢܐ (*šēmûnē*) as a ܬ (*t*). Perhaps the sub-linear part of what appeared to be a ܬ came from the bleeding of the ink from the reverse side of the manuscript. Were this the case, it suggests that the Persian translator worked with only one Syriac manuscript (or manuscript family in

which the misreading was perpetuated) and did not consult or concur with the Greek text or other translations of these two accounts about the poor widow's donation. Or, having decided that **מנין** (*menîn*) meant "hair, string," the Persian translator took the explanatory gloss **ܫܡܘܢܐ** (*šēmûnē*³) to be a synonym of "hair/string" and corrected what he thought was an erroneous **ܫܡܘܢܐ** (*šēmûnē*³) to **ܫܡܘܬܐ** (*šēmûtē*³). Either way, the Persian text cannot be viewed as a more reliable alternative to the Greek text and the other translations.

NOTES

1. Golius's *Persian-Latin Lexicon*: 302 (*chorda, filum netum*) and 451 (*glomus*), in Castell 1669 *Lexicon*, Vol. I.
2. Lane 1877: 2440.
3. Gill (1810: 474) noted, "The Syriac version renders it, *two menim, that is, eighths*." But the Syriac word for "eight" is **ܬܡܘܢܐ** (*tēmune*³) (Payne Smith 1903: 615; BDB 1032). Consequently, **ܫܡܘܢܐ** (*šēmûnē*³) would have been a Hebrew loanword in Syriac for a "one-eighth" coin. Godet (1890: II: 255), without mentioning the Syriac, stated, "Λεπτόν, *mite*: the smallest coin, probably the eighth part of an *as*, which was worth from six to eight centimes (from a halfpenny to three-farthings)." However, Mark 12:42 reads **λεπτά δύο, ὃ ἐστὶν κοδράντης** (the Vulgate has *duo minuta quod est quadrans*), indicating that the coin was one-fourth of the *as/assarius* [אִיסָרָא], which was one-sixteenth or one twenty-fourth of a *denarius*. The coin which was one-eighth of the *as/assarius* was the **פְּרוּטָה** (Jastrow 1903: 57, 1219). However, the

terminology for coins was very fluid, with the *κοδράντης* “quarter” in Matt 5:26 appearing in the Shem Tob *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew* as a פרוטה (Howard 1995: 18–19).